

# Mull's Otters & Eagles – A Photography Tour

Naturetrek Tour Report

5th – 10th April 2022



European Otters



White-tailed Eagle



Short-eared Owl



White-throated Dipper

Tour report and images by Oliver Smart



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Tour participants: Oliver Smart (Leader) with six Naturetrek clients

## Summary

Mull is the third largest of the Hebridean islands and incredibly beautiful, despite heavy human impact on the land. It holds plenty of iconic wildlife and opportunity to watch and photograph some of the species at very close range. The tour was a great success in 2022, following an absence of several years due to COVID restrictions. Sightings of White-tailed and Golden Eagle with Otters and plenty of seabirds made for a wonderful week of wildlife photography.

### Day 1

**Tuesday 5th April**

The group convened at Glasgow Airport for collection and we then drove to the Oban ferry terminal. The weather was very wet and windy for the duration of the journey and the crossing was stable but equally squally. With birds sheltering in the sound there were plenty to observe including Black Guillemots, Great Northern Diver, Kittiwake, Guillemot, Razorbill, Great Black-backed Gull, Gannet and a single Puffin.

The drive across the island to our hotel at Pennyghael was broken up by two brief views of female Hen Harrier, Red Deer and a group of Greylag Geese, Lapwing and Oystercatcher. We hoped the forecast would improve during our next few days on the islands.

We enjoyed meeting Tony, Joy and Paul at the hotel who would be solely looking after our group for the week and we thoroughly relished our first three-course meal. With plans made for the following day, we were excited for an early start and the first chance to search for Otter.

### Day 2

**Wednesday 6th April**

The morning started well, despite gloomy conditions as we found two Hen Harriers, two hunting Short-eared Owls and several waders. Greenshank, Redshank, Oystercatcher and Curlew dominated with several Greylag Goose present too. There were no signs of Otters during the pre-breakfast excursion but nonetheless it was most enjoyable.

After a hearty breakfast and collecting our packed lunches, we headed to Fionnphort and enjoyed the first Wheatear of the year in the harbour. We took the ten-minute boat ride across as foot passengers to Iona and then headed to the west coast to enjoy the wildlife, and scenery. A Great Skua was a good bird to see and despite the Corncrakes not yet having returned from their African wintering grounds, we enjoyed scanning and spotting a few species. A Merlin and Grey Seal were distant and brief, but good to see. We practised with some landscape images here before heading back to the centre of the island through rain showers for lunch, which was accompanied with a hot chocolate in the Argyll Hotel Garden.

A few of the group headed to the Abbey and others on to North Beach, but our time was rapidly running out so haste was made to the ferry for the 16:15 departure. Back at the dock we encountered a close Great Northern Diver, but no sooner had we got into the perfect position it moved into an unphotographable location!

After another splendid dinner we enjoyed a final drive along the coast of Loch Scridain to Loch Beg before returning and learning some Adobe Lightroom tips from Oliver as well as hearing a slideshow on RAW Nature.

## Day 3

Thursday 7th April

With further boat trips postponed due to the strong winds our plans today would be to enjoy cruising around the island in search of wildlife gems. Otters were by far our main target species, so all eyes were needed in search of this delightful mammal. Our first attempt was met with further disappointment as dull, overcast and windy conditions made it difficult for spotting and had we found anything, it would have been rather unpleasant to photograph. It was enjoyable scouting around and seeing other wildlife though and after breakfast the conditions started to improve.

We headed over the mountains to the north of Loch Scridain and into Loch na Keal. Oystercatchers, Mistle Thrush, Meadow Pipits and Skylark popped up all over the place with Raven and Hooded Crow fairly common. We finally starting taking some images as the light began to improve and then we felt like things were starting to change. As we navigated the single-track road Oliver noticed a large flock of gulls taking off and then one of the group members picked up a White-tailed Eagle in flight over the loch. We quickly followed the bird in the minibus and eventually pulled over as it started banking in circles directly overhead. We had fantastically close views, photographs and clear identification of a fish in its talons.

Our excitement continued as shortly afterwards we were standing looking at distant mountains and scattered woodland whilst observing two Golden Eagles flying high over the ridge. Two eagles in a morning was not bad at all! We enjoyed our packed lunches overlooking this marvellous scene and then carried on to Salen, Craignure and then to a little out of the way place called Grasspoint. A short walk to a viewpoint overlooking the mainland was a nice way to get a sense of scale. Distant rain clouds darkened the sky and the mountains of the Ben Nevis range and beyond were covered with fresh snow. A Harbour Porpoise surfaced a number of times, eventually giving everyone brief views.

The afternoon session was focussed around Loch Spelve and Lochbuie and the latter was enjoyed from a general perspective with glorious views and at times delightful sunny conditions. The special moment came though as we edged slowly along Loch Spelve, keeping our eyes trained along the shoreline and eventually, as if it were meant to be, Oliver spotted an Otter in the water. He explained the process of our approach and he reversed to a safe place before we disembarked and steadily walked towards the Otter, stopping every time the animal surfaced and walking whilst it was under water. Within a few minutes we were within shooting range and the animal paid absolutely no attention to us at all, as it enjoyed many successful dives, we believe catching eels. At one point it hauled out and rolled around in the seaweed, relaxed and carried on as if it had not a care in the world. Had it known how excited we were perhaps it'd have behaved differently! As it continued to feed, we followed it for over 30 minutes before it drifted out of sight.

Our return to the hotel was certainly more satisfactory with Red Deer photographed along the road at Glen More. Dinner devoured and the second instalment of Oliver's presentation before discussing settings for our morning eagle boat trip and then we all retired for a well-earned rest.

## Day 4

Friday 8th April

With several days of very tricky conditions, we woke this morning with calm seas and clear skies. A lighter wind was also favourable, albeit from the north so the temperature did not exceed six degrees! We drove promptly after breakfast to Ulva and caught a boat with Mull Charters. We headed out into Loch Tuath and enjoyed immediate views of two White-tailed Eagles. At the ready a fish was thrown and another bird, an adult swooped down and within a split second the fish was taken and the bird was heading off to feed. Glum faces from most suggested they were not quite as prepared for the speed of the eagle so we had to wait for another opportunity. A few minutes later we approached an eagle territory and another fish was prepped for a different adult as it left the nest on the island. This time our group was slightly better prepared for the quick action and soon it was over.

We continued on our way and watched plenty of other seabirds milling around and the sun slightly warmed us as we approached an area where we had tea and enjoyed some stunning scenery. A further White-tailed Eagle was spotted soaring but it did not react to the offering of a fish so we slowly returned having enjoyed some auks, gulls, Shags and Red Deer high on the hillside.

It was now lunchtime so we took off to a high vantage point overlooking the loch and enjoyed the most glorious views looking across to the Treshnish Isles to the west and a snow-capped Ben More to the south.

From our lunch stop we made our way to the north-west of the island and passed by the famous Calgary Bay and beach before winding our way inland once more through Glen Aros. At the river mouth we enjoyed fantastic close photographable views of a Dipper before we continued on our way to Loch na Keal. Here we stopped to watch a pair of Golden Eagles soaring high over the mountains, but this time in decent light, so the markings were easily made out. Both birds landed briefly and it was lovely to observe the golden colour of their plumage.

We skirted the loch and finally returned to familiar territory along Loch Scridain and Loch Beg. We came across three Short-eared Owls and spent the remainder of our day and the best light photographing them hunting over rough grassland. What an end to a most magical day on Mull.

## Day 5

Saturday 9th April

A very full day started at 6am with breakfast and a prompt departure for a trip eagle watching with Mull Charters. We crossed the island to Ulva where “Lady Jayne” was waiting for us. We headed into Loch na Keal where we were witness to some incredible White-tailed Eagle action, with four birds and eight dives! In-between we were blessed with decent photography conditions and regular birds flying close to the boat or against a stunning backdrop of mountains or sky.

We navigated around the loch and then across to the edge of the island of Ulva where several fish farms were being swamped by gulls. They were standing *en masse* on the protective netting, which was now dropping lower into the tanks. In doing so the food dispersal machine was firing food around and through the lower netting. The gulls were then able to pick it off at will! What a clever piece of behaviour.

Following the trip, we jumped onboard “Hoy Lass” and headed up through Loch Tuath towards the Treshnish Isles. We were aiming for our first landing at Lunga and enjoyed beautiful sailing conditions throughout the day, with sunny skies and warming temperatures when out of the northerly winds. Our landing went smoothly with a Purple Sandpiper appearing on the rocks. We headed up to higher ground where Puffins breed, but unfortunately their arrival back to the island had been delayed due to the weather and although over 100 were in the bay they were not coming to their burrows.

Some of the group continued to the larger cliffs where Kittiwakes were already back and made for good photo subjects. During our time there another White-tailed Eagle flew by, as well as a juvenile Peregrine Falcon. Common Guillemots and Razorbills were also loafing on the water and Grey Seals hauled out on nearby rocks.

After our two-hour visit we boarded our vessel and headed the 30 minutes to Staffa. Here we enjoyed Fingal's Cave, where Mendelsohn performed many pieces and for us we admired the extraordinary basalt columns towering from the ocean. We climbed onto the grass plateau and scanned the beautiful scene of Mull, Tiree, Coll and other outer islands in the distance. What a way to spend a day at sea.

After our return voyage, we drove back via Loch na Keal to our hotel and savoured another fine meal and accompaniments before the final instalment of Oliver's talk.

## Day 6

## Sunday 10th April

Our final morning started with another early drive around Loch Scridain and Loch Beg. We encountered little initially, apart from the frequent divers, geese and Curlew. As we covered the northern edge of the loch, we spotted a juvenile White-tailed Eagle on a beach. We tried to pass it, but it flew into a nearby tree, where we were able to photograph it, before it was pushed off by Hooded Crows.

On a little further the light was starting to improve when we caught sight of not one, but two Otters foraging along the shoreline. We parked ahead of them and with the breeze in our faces (important not to be smelt by the Otters), we were able to position ourselves close to the water's edge. The pair continued feeding for about 20 minutes before eventually they came ashore and played, scratched and rolled around in the seaweed. A very special moment for the group and a fitting way to end our final session on Mull.

After a final breakfast we completed our packing and headed to the ferry at Craignure where our leader spotted our fourth Otter of the trip. With the sailing complete and lunch finished at Oban, we made our way back to Glasgow to drop off the group back at the airport.

From tough beginnings to the week with atrocious weather we ended the trip with some magical wildlife that makes this place very special indeed.

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

			April 2022					
	Common name	Scientific name	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>						✓
3	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>					✓	
5	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>				✓		
6	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		✓				
7	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓	✓	✓		
10	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓			✓	
11	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>			✓	✓		
12	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
13	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
15	European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓			✓	
17	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			✓	✓		
18	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓		✓		
19	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>			✓	✓	✓	
20	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
21	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
22	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>		✓		✓		
23	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	April 2022					
			5	6	7	8	9	10
24	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
25	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓				
26	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			✓	✓	✓	
27	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>					✓	
29	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
30	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓
31	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
32	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓		✓	
33	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
36	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>				✓	✓	
37	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>		✓			✓	
38	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
39	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	
40	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
41	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>	✓				✓	
42	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
43	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓				
44	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>			✓	✓		✓
45	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓				
46	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>					✓	
47	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
48	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>					✓	
49	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		✓				
50	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		✓				
51	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
53	Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓	✓			
54	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>			H			
55	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			✓			
56	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>			✓	H		
57	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓	✓		
58	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>						✓
59	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>				✓		
61	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
62	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
63	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
64	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			✓	✓		
65	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>			✓			
66	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			✓	✓		
67	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
68	Common Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
70	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓			✓
71	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			✓	✓		
72	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
73	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
74	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	



			April 2022					
	Common name	Scientific name	5	6	7	8	9	10
75	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>				H		
77	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>			✓			
78	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓			
79	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓

## Mammals

			April 2022					
	Common name	Scientific name	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
2	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>					✓	
3	European Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>			✓			✓
4	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>			✓			
6	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>			✓			

## Plants

			April 2022					
	Common name	Scientific name	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Lesser Celandine	<i>Ficaria verna</i>			✓	✓		
2	Common Primrose	<i>Primula vulgaris</i>			✓			
3	Common Foxglove	<i>Digitalis purpurea</i>			✓	✓		
4	Common Gorse	<i>Ulex europaeus</i>		✓	✓	✓		

